Softball opens season at Georgia Softball Classic

Breeden era begins Feb. 15 against Campbell

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This weekend's action

Middle Tennessee will kick off its 2012-13 campaign at the Georgia Softball Classic in Athens, Ga., this Tuesday. The Blue Raiders will play five games in three days. They will play Campbell on Feb. 15 and 16 at 10 a.m. and 5:30 p.m., respectively, Northwestern on Feb. 15 at 12:30 p.m., and Georgia on Feb. 16 at 12:30 p.m. and Feb. 17 at 10 a.m.

Series' history

The Blue Raiders are relatively unfamiliar with this weekend's competition, having never faced Campbell or Northwestern. They have squared off with Georgia only once, an 8-0 loss in 2010.

New staff, new goals

The Blue Raiders feature a new look for this season after the hiring of Jeff Breeden as head coach. Breeden then hired Falon Catalano as pitching coach and former Alabama standout Kelley Montalvo as the outfielder's and hitting coach. Breeden and company have taken the team "under construction" in hopes of returning to national contention.

Preseason Awards

Middle Tennessee's Kayla Toney and Chelsea Good earned recognition on preseason All-Conference teams this week. Toney was voted Preseason All-Sun Belt First Team, as announced by the conference office Monday. Toney and Good were both nominated on College Sports Madness' Sun Belt Preseason All-Conference teams. Toney earned first-team honors while Good was voted second team.

Sun Belt Coaches' Poll

The Blue Raiders were chosen last in the Preseason Sun Belt Coaches' Poll, released Feb. 4. The squad failed to make last year's Sun Belt Conference Tournament, but will look for redemption this

season. "With us only receiving 12 votes, it definitely shows we haven't garnered a lot of respect from the league's coaches," head coach Jeff Breeden said. "That's okay though; we will work harder and earn it in 2013."

Toney Awards

Junior Kayla Toney returns for the Blue Raiders after earning All-Sun Belt First Team honors in 2012 and Preseason All-Sun Belt honors this season. Toney finished the 2012 campaign batting .410 with 12 doubles and 15 runs batted in.

Youthful roster

MT's 2012-13 roster features just eight upperclassman (four seniors), but several underclassman are expected to contribute heavily. Freshman LaRi Mitchell has impressed with her speed in the field and on the basepaths, and hit .368 (6 for 19) this fall. In addition, Sophomores Laura Dukes and Caitlin McClure will see innings as a catcher/pitcher duo, respectively. Dukes will likely take over the starting catcher's role after the departure of Natalie Ysais, though freshmen Chrissy Polka is fighting for the spot.

Career records watch

Several Middle Tennessee softball players are within reach of attaining spots on the top 10 of career records, they are:

- Nina Davenport, who hit six triples last year, is currently tied with Allison Cheatham (1995-98) atop the career triples list with nine. Davenport's speed has also put her in the running for stolen base records. Though she currently is not in the top 10 of successful or attempted stolen bases, all are within reach. Davenport is 21 of 28 in stolen bases, and No. 10 in each catagory is 33 and 40, respectively.

- Kayla Toney hit 12 doubles last season to bring her career total to 18. With two seasons of eligibility remaining, Toney needs just eight two-baggers to reach No. 10 on the list. Toney is also listed in the top 10 of several other career records, including on-base percentage (seventh), slugging percentage (fourth) and batting average (sixth).

- With 10 home runs on her resume, Nina Dever needs just one to reach the top 10 career home run list. If Dever matches last year's season total (seven), she will move into a tie for fifth-place on the list. Dever is sixth in career stolen base percentage (.875), as well.

- Kristi Marquez has been an anchor at third base over the past several seasons, and ranks seventh in career assists (321). Marquez had 121 assists last season. The overall leader in career assists, Brittney Banania (2008-11), has 494.

- Though she has battled injuries her first two seasons in the circle, Jordyn Fisherback has tallied 100 strikeouts, and is just 33 behind No. 10 in career strikeouts, Caty Jutson (2009-12). Jutson had 133 in her career. Ninth on the list is Courtney Wallace (1998-2002), with 182 strikeouts.

Into the unknown

In the first month of the season, the Blue Raiders will square off against eight opponents they have never faced before. Middle Tennessee will face Campbell and Northwestern at the Georgia Softball Classic (Feb. 15-17), Mississippi Valley and McNeese State at the Red and Blue Classic (Feb. 22-

24) and Gardner Webb, Southern and Charlotte at the War Eagle Invitationa (March 1-3). Finally, James Madison will be a new opponent for MT at the Coastal Carolina Tournament (March 8-10).

Keeping up-to-date

For complete up-to-the-minute scoring and game information throughout the season, follow @MT_Softball on Twitter, or on Facebook at MTSU Softball.

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